

The most boring headline imaginable according, supposedly, to Claud Cockburn, is: "Small earthquake in Chile, not many dead." I want to suggest an update: "Futile jihadi attack in (insert); not many dead."

For, not to be too Swiftian about this and with all due honour to those who have perished and with deepest of condolences to those who knew and loved them, not many dead is what we have. Since January of last year in Europe there have been, depending how you count, between five and 10 attacks identified as Islamist. The tolls have been 206 murdered and 728 injured (including Paris – 37 dead – and Brussels, 35). And you can also number of course, the 224 Russians blown up over Sinai. But that will only get up to the same level as two weeks' slaughter on Europe's roads – 25,000 fatal accidents last year and 1.5million injured to one degree or another of severity. Clearly losing people to violence at this scale all at once is a different matter from accidents and the other hazards of life. But a reign of terror this is not. What we have now is a series of blood-soaked localised riots and freelance, one-off killings by psychopaths with their god on their side. If I were an Isis military emir, I would be telling the lads they needed to try harder. As a threat designed to sap our will, these attacks are a species of awful, horrific, joke.

But in one regard the attacks have been a triumph. Isis's PR emir should be demanding a pay rise, trumpeting his organisation's AVE – advertising value equivalent: how much it would have cost to buy the space these obscenely destructive holy temper tantrums have filled. Because it is only space in our media that is being conquered. And that invasion could be contained on a dime: "Futile attack; not many dead."

Denying the oxygen of publicity would not of course halt the mayhem, much less address the underlying causes of it. But it would remove the attacker's easiest win. Never mind Isis's announced dreams of armageddon, the immediate plan is the creation of a media panic and it is hard not to conclude that their most effective ally in this campaign is our media.

A measure of journalistic self-denial, therefore, might well be in order. Self-denial, of course, because censorship would constitute an equally unthinking surrender to the Islamists. Any external imposition of content control would be to give up on the

very thing Isis and its “mini me”s want destroyed: our human rights of which free expression is the capstone, because without it none of the others can be guaranteed. But self-denial is another matter.

*The Guardian* recently asked: “Do we need to see images of horror to understand it?” Obviously not: and, of course, there is a line. Editorial policies are forged and judgements made about their enforcement. In which case: if no actual moments of beheading, why minutes of ranting on ITN at 6.12pm from a “Man with blood on hands”. That was, simply, too much information but no real increase of knowledge. And equally, day by day, as we really cannot actually bear reality, we have page after page of information: formulaic stories making routine the death and maiming, heroism and desperate searching. But we would lose nothing by having less, and as a crucial bonus the perpetrators’ triumph would be pricked by our inattention. If, as John Bogart said so long ago, “dog bites man” is not news, then this repetitive, swamping coverage cannot still be news – at least not in terms of an underlying reporting frame of uncontrollable menace, massive destruction and inexplicable motives (aside from references to the events of the seventh – Christian – century).

But there is another way. For all the horror, the significance and the pressure of “if it bleeds it leads”, self-denial is possible. The line can be better defined and more tightly drawn with no meaningful effect on free speech. After all, what does editing mean if not the exercise of choice?

The setting of the news agenda is not inscribed on tables of stone; nor is the scope and tone of reporting mandated by any higher authority. Nor should it be. Editorially, man bites dog at this point could easily be: “Futile attack” “More Soft targets” and, above all, “Life goes on.”

It is a question of language. “Operatives”, for example, is no necessary descriptor of a terrorist when the evidence would support “amateur” just as readily, as was vividly illustrated by the killers who set out to blow up a filled Stade de France but forget to buy tickets to get in. It is also a question of context – the isomorphism of loss of ground in the “caliphate”, say, and the levels of terrorist activity outside it rather than a succession of siloed stories on different pages. And there is a question of constraint, eg: having what a Bradford killer of a Glasgow shopkeeper

claims was his motivation publically proclaimed by his lawyer for amplification by the media made his trip to Scotland entirely worthwhile. But, like the bloody handed-man in Woolwich, it tells us nothing beyond what we already know: he is – allegedly at this point – a homicidal maniac.

So, yes, we have too much information and not, remotely, enough knowledge. The sort of clear-sighted, grounded insights produced by a Shiraz Maher in the *New Statesman* would be a template. We need less horror, terror and deadly ‘operatives’ and more soft targets hit by murderous ignorant dupes. After *Charlie Hebdo*, Steve Bell, as usual right on the money, had three men in clownish black Halloween skeleton body-suits, Kalashnikovs at the ready, running down a Parisian street shouting: “Why are the fucking bastards still laughing at us”. We are “laughing” in the sense of having utter contempt – even while we can acknowledge the basis of grievance – but you would never know that from our reporting of their futilities.